

# Summary

## S.1 The changing meaning of neighbourhoods and villages

### Background and aims of this study

The Dutch government is seeking to create a society in which citizens take more responsibility for themselves, among other things by coming together to tackle social issues in a so-called 'do-democracy'. Many of the new tasks assigned to citizens are situated in their local setting, such as helping to maintain the liveability of their neighbourhoods and villages, for example where local authorities cut spending on sports facilities or maintaining the public space. The local community is also seen as a source of care provision for people with physical or psychological disabilities; population ageing means that the number of people needing such care is increasing, and they moreover more often live independently. Public goods such as natural assets and historical heritage are also becoming increasingly dependent on the self-organising capacity of citizens. One of the assumptions underlying the high expectations placed on citizens is that they feel a sense of commitment to their immediate geographical setting.

However, increased mobility and the growing use of ICT in the twentieth century led to a major 'upscaling' of people's lives. People began living their lives increasingly outside the immediate environment of their home, and local social ties consequently became looser and less obligatory. However, the residential setting did not simply lose importance: people in fact began attaching greater value to the qualities of the local environment that made living there pleasant. In addition, now that the local setting no longer fulfils necessary functions, it is argued that residents meet their need for a sense of belonging by creating a 'mental' attachment to their local neighbourhood.

In this study we investigate the attachment of modern village-dwellers in the Netherlands to their villages, and how important that attachment is for their willingness to act for local causes. We also look for differences between villages in the extent to which residents commit to such local causes. Now that the government is leaving more local tasks to residents, the quality of the local setting is also becoming more dependent on resident action.

Socially vital villages – villages where lots of residence are active – will develop more positively than villages where residents are not willing to do much for their residential setting. There is therefore a risk that geographical differences in social vitality will exacerbate existing geographical inequalities.

### The database

The study uses data from the Socially Vital Countryside database (svp'11), which were collected in the autumn of 2011. This is a 'clustered' dataset, from which data were drawn representing 6,888 respondents aged 15 years and older, living in 222 outlying areas and 516 villages with fewer than 3,000 residents. The database provides a representative picture of the more than two million Dutch citizens living in small villages and rural areas. The

database differs from other large databases in the wide attention paid to different forms of residential action and local attachment.

## S.2 Attachment to villages

### Local attachment due to landscape, culture and acquaintances

The first question addressed in the study is: *How are village-dwellers attached to their local setting?* In answering this question, four types of attachment were distinguished. In the first, *functional attachment*, the upscaling of people's lives can be seen clearly. Most residents work, shop and go out mainly outside the village. Almost all residents leave the village at least weekly, and a large minority (42%) do so almost daily.

The importance of the world outside the village is also evident in the second form of attachment: *social attachment*. Most village residents have more friends and acquaintances living outside than within the village; a third of village-dwellers have no friends at all in their village. Only a quarter of villagers consider the social life in their village to be very important. Yet most villagers do have lots of contacts in their village: they are on first-name terms with dozens of fellow villagers and have various residents to whom they can turn when they need help.

Local attachment need not always be about people: residents can also feel 'mentally' attached to the place where they live if it has a valuable meaning for them. The third form of attachment distinguished here is therefore *cultural attachment*. Local traditions help villagers feel attached to their village or region more than is the case for town-dwellers. Although many historical traditions have become less important in village life, the majority of residents occasionally speak a dialect or regional language and two-thirds sometimes follow local and regional media. Finally, the fourth form of attachment distinguished here is *landscape attachment*. Now that the village plays a less important role in the lives of village-dwellers, living in pleasant surroundings in an attractive landscape has become a more important part of their local attachment. Half of village-dwellers say that they consider the local landscape a very important part of their living enjoyment, and a similar proportion say the same about the quietness and space.

### The difference between being attached and being tied

There are considerable differences in the way in which different groups of residents are attached to their village. New residents are for example less strongly attached to the village than those who have lived there for a long time. The same applies for young people. There is also a striking difference between residents who are voluntarily *attached* to the village and residents who are *tied* to the village by circumstance. In addition to the large group of residents who have a regional (or even cosmopolitan) orientation, and therefore mainly see the positives of village life (and not the negatives), there is also a group of less mobile residents – such as those aged 75 or older and those with limited financial means – who are functionally tied to the village relatively strongly. Yet they derive less from their village

than other residents: they have fewer social contacts in the village to whom they can go for company or help, and also feel less valued by their fellow villagers.

### Social and cultural attachment contribute to local action

The second research question is: *What relationships exist between the local attachment of village-dwellers and their willingness to act for local causes?* It was expected that local attachment would make a key contribution to local action: people who feel strongly attached to their village are after all more likely to attach importance to what happens in the village, which means they will perceive more benefit from investing time for a local cause than someone who feels less attached.

*Social attachment*, in particular, is found to play a role in resident action. Residents who are more socially attached to their village more often do something for the different local causes studied here: they are more often active in promoting the liveability of the village, more often willing to help their neighbours and more often do something for local assets such as nature and cultural heritage. *Cultural attachment* also contributes to resident action for each of these local causes, though to a slightly lesser extent. It is incidentally not necessarily the case that social and cultural attachment only lead to a willingness to act for local causes: a willingness to act can conversely also reinforce the local attachment.

The *functional attachment* of village-dwellers was found to make no contribution to resident action. On the contrary, those who do not travel outside the village much, for example for shopping, actually do slightly less for local causes. *Landscape attachment* also does not prompt people to do much for their village. Those who attach great value to the attractive landscape and to the quietness and space of their village do more often do something to improve environmental assets such as nature and heritage, but not for other local causes.

### S.3 Differences in social vitality between villages

#### Greater willingness to act in attractively located villages thanks to strong attachment

The third research question is twofold: *What relationships exist between the location and size of a village and the willingness of residents to act for local causes? And to what extent are these relationships explained by differences in local attachment?* Two aspects of village location were distinguished which affect how villages develop. The first aspect is the location of the village relative to a town: villages close to towns are desirable because they allow the benefits of living in the countryside to be combined with the advantages of the town such as employment and good amenities. Earlier research has shown that such villages are populated by residents who on average are more affluent, better educated and less traditional than residents of more isolated villages. Since residents of villages close to towns are more oriented towards those towns, it was expected that they would feel less local attachment and therefore do less for local causes.

The second determinant of village development is the attractiveness of the landscape in which the village is situated. As the countryside has increasingly become a 'consumption space', where people like to spend time because of the pleasant surroundings, an attrac-

tive location is a useful aid in attracting new residents. Consequently, villages in attractive settings are considered desirable. Residents of these villages are healthier and happier about where they live than residents of less attractive villages. It was expected that residents of more attractive villages would feel more attachment and therefore do more for local causes.

Virtually no association was found between proximity to a town and village action for local causes. A relationship was by contrast found with an attractive village location. In general, residents of more attractively located villages slightly more often do something for local causes than residents of less well situated villages, though the precise differences depend on the proximity of a town. In the countryside surrounding towns, residents of attractively located villages are slightly more active on behalf of village liveability and local assets such as nature and cultural heritage, but do not offer help to neighbours more often than residents of less attractive villages.

In more isolated rural areas, the distinction between attractive and less attractive villages is mainly a social one. Residents of attractively located isolated villages are slightly more willing to help neighbours and fellow residents than residents of less attractively situated isolated villages, and are also slightly more often active for village liveability. They are not especially active on behalf of the natural or cultural assets of the village.

Why do residents of more attractively located villages do more for local causes than residents of less attractively situated villages? Different population groups (e.g. churchgoers, older persons and highly educated people) do more for local causes than others. Differences between villages might thus be the result of differences in population composition. However, this was found not to be the case: the differences in population profile between village types are small, and the associated differences in willingness to act are negligible. More important is the local attachment of residents. In other words, residents of more attractive villages do more for local causes because they are more attached to their local setting. Local attachment cannot however explain all the differences between villages: even if residents were identical in terms of individual characteristics and attachment, residents of attractive villages close to towns would still do more to improve environmental assets such as nature and heritage. It may be that factors are at work here which are nothing to do with the village residents; for example, environmental assets may be under greater pressure in villages close to towns than in more isolated rural areas.

### More initiative in smallest villages despite limited attachment

In terms of village size, it was expected on the one hand that the same factors that prompt residents of small villages to be slightly more active than town-dwellers would also mean that residents of the very smallest villages would do more for their villages than those living in slightly larger small villages. Arguing against this is the fact that the smallest villages have little to offer to foster resident attachment, which means they will be less inclined to do something for their village.

This study found that residents of the smallest villages show slightly stronger cultural and landscape attachment to their village than residents of slightly larger villages. Functionally,

however, they are much more outwardly focused and their social attachment is also relatively weak. Although cultural attachment can work in favour of the smallest villages the limited social attachment can lead to less resident action. Despite this, residents of the smallest villages do something for local causes slightly more often than residents of larger villages. They are not notably more willing to help neighbours, but are more often active for liveability and environmental assets.

The high willingness to act on the part of residents of the smallest villages is not due to their local attachment, nor to the composition of the village population. Possible explanations are that amenities and associations in the smallest villages rely fairly heavily on resident action, with fewer people in the smallest villages among whom tasks can be divided. It may also be that residents of the smallest villages undertake activities in order to meet each other, whereas those living in slightly larger villages use existing meeting facilities for this.

### Greater willingness to act where liveability is perceived as good

More resident action is often expected where liveability is most under pressure; but good liveability can also reduce local attachment and therefore local action. The fourth and final research question addressed here is: *What relationships exist between the liveability of a village and resident action? And to what extent can this be explained by differences in local attachment?* Since 'liveability' is not a uniformly defined concept, we focus on liveability as experienced by residents, and on two objective aspects of the residential environment that are often associated with liveability: the presence of village amenities and population shrinkage.

Based on residents' opinions on the liveability of their village, good liveability is associated with a greater willingness to act. Residents who regard the liveability of their village as good more often do something to promote that liveability, are more often willing to help neighbours and more often do something for environmental assets. A willingness to act for these goals thus often appears to stem from satisfaction with the village and the strong attachment that goes with this.

### Scarcity of amenities and shrinkage do not undermine social vitality

There are two opposing views on the relationship between village amenities and local action. On the one hand, it is argued that villages with fewer amenities offer residents few opportunities to meet each other, leading to limited social attachment and low collective action. The converse argument is that scarcity of amenities can prompt residents to organise more things themselves. The results show no relationship between the presence of village amenities and willingness to act: all things being equal, residents do not do more for the village if there are more amenities, but also do not do less.

Population shrinkage also does not reduce village action. For each of the three local goals studied, residents of shrinking villages are just as active as residents of growing villages. And if we look at *how* village action manifests itself, residents of shrinking villages relatively often play a role in organising initiatives for village residents. Although those living in shrinking villages have a stronger cultural attachment to their village, this does not explain

this willingness to act. The reason may lie in the changes that confront residents and the major challenges they face as a result. The great attention devoted by governments to shrinking population areas may also provide a boost for resident initiatives.

### Small differences between villages, but these could increase

The differences in local action between villages are found to be small. This can be seen partly in the light of the small socio-economic and demographic differences across the countryside. Characteristics such as education level, church affiliation and age have a great influence on the amount that villagers do for various causes, but the differences in population composition across villages are too small to lead to differences in resident action between villages.

Selective migration processes do however lead to geographical differences in population composition in rural areas. For example, it is often people with high potential who leave the peripheral regions, leaving behind a population with less potential. In addition, incomers to villages close to towns are significantly better educated and more affluent than new residents of isolated villages. Since better educated people are more often prepared to do something for the liveability and assets of their village, it may be expected that in villages close to towns (compared with isolated villages), more voluntary activities will take place to promote liveability and village assets. At the same time, since better educated people are less willing to help neighbours, changes in the population composition in this respect could work to the advantage of isolated villages.

## S.4 Promoting socially vital villages

What can local authorities, civil-society organisations, village councils and associations do to ensure that residents take more responsibility for their living environment? Based on the results of this study, a number of insights can be formulated.

### Not social cohesion, but new social attachments

The results of this study confirm that social attachment can be a key contributor to resident action, but also place question marks alongside the usefulness of the term 'social cohesion'. Social cohesion implies that social attachment is a phenomenon that occurs at the level of villages (or neighbourhoods), which would mean that one village has stronger social cohesion than another. This study shows that differences in social attachment between villages are negligible compared to the major differences in social attachment between individual residents. Social networks are thus very unequally distributed among village residents.

This also raises questions about measures intended to promote social cohesion at the level of villages. Many of these measures serve mainly to strengthen existing networks and probably contribute little to the social vitality of a village. Members of these networks are after all already socially attached and often already active for local causes. Attempts to awaken the latent potential in a village could therefore be more effectively directed at

*expanding* social networks, so involving residents in village life who were not previously engaged. These new contacts also often bring new skills, knowledge and insights and help ensure that the local civil society better reflects the village population.

### Inclusive villages

It is not only important to strengthen village action. For residents whose circumstances mean they are forced to rely heavily on the village, participating in village life can also make an important contribution to their personal welfare, for example by combating loneliness and providing acquaintances to whom they can turn for help. Both population ageing and public spending cuts mean that the number of residents who are dependent for their welfare on the local setting is set to increase markedly, especially in peripheral villages.

Promoting social cohesion in a general sense is not the best means of improving the welfare of these vulnerable residents. A targeted approach is more fruitful here, which brings individual residents into contact with local networks, for example by involving them in or stopping them withdrawing from volunteering, or by facilitating mutual support networks.

### New traditions

In addition to social attachment, the study also found that cultural attachment is a source of action for local causes. This cultural attachment is stronger in small villages than in towns, and the smaller the village, the more important local culture is for resident attachment. Although many local cultural traditions have been displaced by mainstream culture over the years, this need not mean that the cultural attachment of village residents – and therefore their willingness to act – has reduced. First, many old traditions are finding new forms of expression outside folk culture. Although these new manifestations may have a different meaning for residents, they do appear to strengthen resident attachment. There are also ‘new’ traditions, such as cultural festivals and green initiatives.

These new and renewed traditions do not unite the same groups of residents as dialects and regional music, but they are still examples of how groups of residents can give collective expression in their local setting to what they consider important. The new traditions are therefore manifestations of a changing culture, in which villages are still associated with nostalgia, but in which there is also room for traditions that place local village life in a broader, global perspective.

### The local scale

Although village residents are accustomed to a regional life, for many the village is still the most natural scale for local action. Currently, village residents are increasingly encouraged to look beyond the boundaries of their village, including for their civil society, for example by combining their strengths with residents of other villages for projects such as a shared community centre or sports complex. But the fact that village residents increasingly seek activities outside their village does not guarantee that they will find it equally natural to transfer their volunteering effort outside the village.

Practice has shown that collaboration between villages is often difficult to achieve. One factor is that the social attachment with residents of other villages is weaker and that many village residents still think in the first place in terms of their own village. There is a real risk that the envisaged 'upscaling' of village life will undermine resident action, because action outside the village does not correspond with the local attachment of residents. It is therefore important to work to develop local attachments that go beyond village boundaries, so that collaboration between villages can be achieved without this diminishing the great enthusiasm which many village residents display in their action for local causes.